

Client: JP Ramos
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Here's to the Douro boys

MARTIN MORAN



The pick-up truck wound its way up the track between the vines. Views of the Douro Valley vineyards, a Unesco world heritage site, were breathtaking, but so was the temperature. The gauge on the dash said 42C. I was slowly melting, but my host, Alvaro Martinho, the vineyard manager at Quinta das Carvalhas, shrugged and described the day as “fresh”. He didn’t have a single bead of sweat.

He made the point that organisms, including people and vines, become adapted to their environment. The Douro area is best known for its port, but

increasing quantities of the grapes are being turned into some of Portugal’s best table wines. The winemakers have a wealth of indigenous varieties to choose from, many of them unfamiliar to outsiders and a mouthful to pronounce.

The key red variety is touriga nacional, but other important ones include the wonderfully named bastardo, touriga franca, tinto cao and tinta roriz. Whites are even more obscure, but include viosinho, rabigato, malvasia and gouveio.

Sometimes when you ask what a wine is made from in the Douro, you’ll just be told it’s a field blend. That is to say it’s an old vineyard planted with a mix of grapes.

Several producers have told me they make a wine from 20-30 vine types and haven’t identified them all.

Wine styles for Douro reds tend to be rich, with plum, berry fruit and liquorice flavours and varying degrees of power and tannin. The whites are ridiculously fresh and have a stony mineral quality that seems unlikely, given the region’s temperatures, but the vines are perfectly adapted to their environment.

The self-styled Douro boys have done more than anyone in the past decade to put the region’s wines on the map. The five estates – Niepoort, Quinta do Vallado, Quinta do Crasto, Quinta Vale Meao and Quinta Vale D Maria – are independent, but promote together. Standards

across all are consistently high and prices vary from about €15-€40.

While you will find the odd Douro wine in a supermarket, independents and chains do it much better. The off-licence chain O’Briens (obrienswines.ie) lists the excellent **Duorum** wines as well as the rich, smooth Altano Organic 2010 for €16.49.

Wines on the Green (winesonthegreen.com), in Dublin’s city centre, stocks wines from some great Douro producers, including Alves de Sousa and Conceito. The latter’s strikingly labelled Conceito Tinto 2009 (€32.99), left, is partially a field blend of 20 varieties and emblematic of modern Douro reds. It features intense fruit and notes of cedar. For an entry-level red, try Quinta Sa de Baixo, €10.99 from McHugh’s in Dublin 5 (mchughs.ie).



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Glass act: valpolicella ripasso

Valpolicella is the most famous red wine to come out of the Veneto wine region in northeastern Italy, writes *Ernie Whalley*. It was popular in the 1960s, until overproduction resulted in a dramatic drop in quality.

The region's reputation was rescued by a new technique, marketed by the Masi winery in the early 1980s. Regular valpolicella wine was given a second fermentation over the skins and lees left over from making amaranone. The

process, still in use today, imparts additional colour, texture and flavour and increases the alcohol content. Ripasso, the end result, retains the vibrancy of valpolicella, but is darker in colour, with more presence and complexity.

The 24 wines in our tasting were all labelled "superiore", having undergone at least 12 months' ageing in wood and with a minimum ABV of 12%. From these, Caroline Byrne and I selected eight. Here are the first four.



TORRE D'ORTI VALPOLICELLA SUPERIORE RIPASSO 2012
SILVER

quintessentialwines.ie, Drogheda, Co Louth; €21.75

EW: Vanilla from small-barrel fermentation, but not too obtrusive. Morello cherry fruit with a hint of liquorice and aniseed. Very enjoyable.

CB: Dark fruit – damson and cherry, good depth and length. Well made with a lot of character.

17/20

TORRE DEL FALASCO VALPOLICELLA SUPERIORE RIPASSO 2012
BRONZE

Clontarf Wines, D3; Florries Fine Wine, Tramore, Co Waterford; €17.99

EW: Loads of charm. Perfect for relaxed, easy, food-friendly drinking.

CB: Ripe cherry and fresh plum, layers of dried fruit, cocoa and nutmeg. Soft, round tannins – lovely texture through the finish.

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REMO FARINA MONTECORNA VALPOLICELLA RIPASSO 2012
SILVER

curiouswines.ie, Kinsale Road, Cork and Naas, Co Kildare; €22 (on promo at €17.60 for two during October)

EW: Sensitive oaking makes the rich fruit the main attraction, with a gloriously extended finish.

CB: Ripe cherry and anise with integrated oak flavours of leather and smoke.

17.5/20

PORTA NOVA ITALIA VALPOLICELLA RIPASSO 2011
BRONZE

obrienswines.ie, stores nationwide; €20.49

EW: One of the few wines in the tasting with an ABV lower than 14%. Plenty of punch, but no pepper hit.

CB: Elegant and approachable, with flavours of sweet red fruit and spice, sour cherry, ripe black fruit and supple tannins. Eminently drinkable.

16.5/20



UK Nationals

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Going native
The Douro valley in Portugal produces a wealth of indigenous varieties of grape that are unfamiliar